

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks on Improving Homeland Security in Kaneohe, Hawaii

December 28, 2009

Attempted Terrorist Act on Northwest Airlines Flight 253

Hey, guys. Good morning, everybody. I want to take just a few minutes to update the American people on the attempted terrorist attack that occurred on Christmas Day and the steps we're taking to ensure the safety and security of the country.

The investigation's ongoing, and I spoke again this morning with Attorney General Eric Holder, the Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano, and my Counterterrorism and Homeland Security Adviser, John Brennan. I asked them to keep—continue monitoring the situation, to keep the American people and Members of Congress informed.

Here's what we know so far. On Christmas Day, Northwest Airlines Flight 253 was en route from Amsterdam, Netherlands, to Detroit. As the plane made its final approach to Detroit Metropolitan Airport, a passenger allegedly tried to ignite an explosive device on his body, setting off a fire.

Thanks to the quick and heroic actions of passengers and crew, the suspect was immediately subdued, the fire was put out, and the plane landed safely. The suspect is now in custody and has been charged with attempting to destroy an aircraft. And a full investigation has been launched into this attempted act of terrorism, and we will not rest until we find all who were involved and hold them accountable.

Now, this was a serious reminder of the dangers that we face and the nature of those who threaten our homeland. Had the suspect succeeded in bringing down that plane, it could have killed nearly 300 passengers and crew, innocent civilians preparing to celebrate the holidays with their families and friends.

The American people should be assured that we are doing everything in our power to keep you and your families safe and secure during this busy holiday season. Since I was first notified of this incident, I've ordered the following actions to be taken to protect the American people and to secure air travel.

First, I directed that we take immediate steps to ensure the safety of the traveling public. We made sure that all flights still in the air were secure and could land safely. We immediately enhanced screening and security procedures for all flights, domestic and international. We added Federal air marshals to flights entering and leaving the United States. And we're working closely in this country—Federal, State, and local law enforcement—with our international partners.

Second, I've ordered two important reviews, because it's absolutely critical that we learn from this incident and take the necessary measures to prevent future acts of terrorism. The first review involves our watch list system, which our Government has had in place for many years to identify known and suspected terrorists so that we can prevent their entry into the United States.

Apparently, the suspect in the Christmas incident was in this system, but not on a watch list such as the so-called no-fly list. So I've ordered a thorough review not only of how

information related to the subject was handled but of the overall watch list system and how it can be strengthened.

The second review will examine all screening policies, technologies, and procedures related to air travel. We need to determine just how the suspect was able to bring dangerous explosives aboard an aircraft and what additional steps we can take to thwart future attacks.

Third, I've directed my national security team to keep up the pressure on those who would attack our country. We do not yet have all the answers about this latest attempt, but those who would slaughter innocent men, women, and children must know that the United States will more—do more than simply strengthen our defenses; we will continue to use every element of our national power to disrupt, to dismantle, and defeat the violent extremists who threaten us, whether they are from Afghanistan or Pakistan, Yemen or Somalia, or anywhere where they are plotting attacks against the U.S. homeland.

Finally, the American people should remain vigilant, but also be confident. Those plotting against us seek not only to undermine our security but also the open society and the values that we cherish as Americans. This incident, like several that have preceded it, demonstrates that an alert and courageous citizenry are far more resilient than an isolated extremist. As a nation, we will do everything in our power to protect our country. As Americans, we will never give in to fear or division; we will be guided by our hopes, our unity, and our deeply held values. That's who we are as Americans. That's what our brave men and women in uniform are standing up for as they spend the holidays in harm's way. And we will continue to do everything that we can to keep America safe in the new year and beyond.

Situation in Iran

Before I leave, let me also briefly address the events that have taken place over the last few days in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The United States joins with the international community in strongly condemning the violent and unjust suppression of innocent Iranian citizens, which has apparently resulted in detentions, injuries, and even death.

For months, the Iranian people have sought nothing more than to exercise their universal rights. Each time they have done so, they have been met with the iron fist of brutality, even on solemn occasions and holy days. And each time that has happened the world has watched with deep admiration for the courage and the conviction of the Iranian people, who are part of Iran's great and enduring civilization.

What's taking place within Iran is not about the United States or any other country; it's about the Iranian people and their aspirations for justice and a better life for themselves. And the decision of Iran's leaders to govern through fear and tyranny will not succeed in making those aspirations go away. As I said in Oslo, it's telling when governments fear the aspirations of their own people more than the power of any other nation.

Along with all free nations, the United States stands with those who seek their universal rights. We call upon the Iranian Government to abide by the international obligations that it has to respect the rights of its own people. We call for the immediate release of all who have been unjustly detained within Iran. We will continue to bear witness to the extraordinary events that are taking place there. And I'm confident that history will be on the side of those who seek justice.

Thank you very much, everybody, and happy New Year.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:01 a.m. at Marine Corps Base Hawaii, Kaneohe Bay. In his remarks, he referred to Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, suspect in the December 25 explosive device incident on Northwest Airlines Flight 253. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Homeland security improvement efforts, remarks in Kaneohe, HI.

Locations: Kaneohe, HI.

Names: Abdulmutallab, Umar Farouk; Brennan, John O.; Holder, Eric H., Jr.; Napolitano, Janet A.

Subjects: Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Deployment; Aviation : Air travel security measures, expansion; Aviation : Airport security detection capabilities, review; Hawaii : President's visit; Homeland Security, Department of : Secretary; Iran : Democracy and human rights issues; Justice, Department of : Attorney General; Terrorism : Counterterrorism efforts; Terrorism : December 25 explosive device incident on Northwest Airlines Flight 253; Terrorism : Global threat; Terrorism : Terrorist watch lists, procedural review; White House Office : Assistants to the President :: Homeland Security and Counterterrorism.

DCPD Number: DCPD200901017.